

PAPER TRAILS

By

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## Abstract

*Paper Trails* is an exhibition consisting of two animations, *Inquisitive Vignettes* and *Traces*. These animations, one of which is projected on and accompanied by a player piano, examine the creation and interpretation of our cultural and personal histories. We construct these narratives from a variety of records, whether they are memories or physical artifacts, and while technology enables the ephemeral to be made tangible, the following questions remain. How much has been lost, preserved, excised or manipulated to alter the narrative, and what traces have been left?

As we live, we record. We try to remember, and we leave traces. We construct the narrative of our lives from a collection of memories of key events. While these memories allow us to create a personal identity, there is a multitude of experiences that is not preserved. Over time, we have developed strategies for creating more sophisticated records and distributing them more efficiently. Technology allows the ephemeral to become tangible. Books solidify the thoughts of one individual or group to be shared with another, and the actions of a musician's hands are contained in the perforations of a piano roll.

In addition to creating our own records, we interpret and interact with those provided by others. Depending on the artifact, there are opportunities for various levels of active or passive engagement. Using music as an example, there are definite distinctions between playing a recording and playing the piece oneself from the sheet music. Intensive study of either offers insight into the composer, but learning to play a song requires more involvement. It initiates a conversation between composer and musician.

I had been studying piano for a few years before visiting the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, Missouri, and after hearing a pianist in residence play *The Magnetic Rag* and *Euphonic Sounds*, I became obsessed with mastering the jaunty rhythms and elegant melodies associated with Joplin's music – ragtime. This musical form preceded jazz and was developed in my home state of Missouri. While many ragtime composers remain relative mysteries, they have left a wealth of physical artifacts in the form of early records and sheet music. The sounds preserved in the grooves and ink provide access to fragments of the consciousness of that generation. Those very sounds

were improvised, edited, and overheard by the neighbors ad nauseam, before being given a name and sent out into the world, where they echoed through the dance halls and bordellos to the delight of the romantic youth and the dismay of their elders. In 2001, my fondness for this music sparked a series of interviews with historians and performers as I developed a short documentary on the composer James Scott and attempted to learn his music.

As a visual artist with an invested interest in narrative, the opportunity to combine my love for musical composition and drawing enticed me to produce animations. Mediated by the flow of time, both animation and music exhibit similar traits in the manner of their origin and eventual perception. In their construction, time is fractured and repeated by a series of recurring actions that allow for unlimited contemplation and variation of the tiniest fragments that join one moment to another. These segments of time, so distinct and malleable in their creation, are reconstituted at the moment of exhibition, streaming as a singular sequence of stimuli that define the audience's experience of the work.

Passages of notes and chord progressions are defining elements of the composer's concerns, while an animator's decisions surround the ideal moment at which to photograph the progression of an action. After taking thousands of photographs documenting the development of drawings and the events that transpire in these constructed spaces, the connections between the process of animation and the ways we form our cultural and personal histories became clear. In the creation of an animation or a history, certain individual instances are marked for preservation, but the vast majority of

the process is a continual flow of moments hidden from view. How much has been lost, preserved, excised or manipulated to alter the narrative, and what traces have been left?

The two animations that form my thesis exhibition, *Inquisitive Vignettes* (which incorporates music of my own composition) and *Traces*, examine these intricacies. As they were developed in a linear succession, they also serve to document my progress as I worked to refine my animation skills. Concurrently with the production of my first animation, I was creating a series of landscapes in shadowboxes. These environments, which were constructed from several layers of cut paper, informed the way I currently approach animation. I built a multi-plane camera, so that I can assemble animated scenes from numerous layers of drawings that sit at various distances from the lens. (Figure 1) *The Archivist* resulted from my first experiments with this equipment. As I continued to familiarize myself with the technical possibilities and nuances this animation stand offered me, I sought to develop a project comprised of short, related vignettes. Thinking back to the interviews I conducted when researching the ragtime composer James Scott, it seemed that the interview process – a social custom entirely devoted to interpreting and re-contextualizing past events achronologically – would be well suited to my purpose. With all their awkwardness, spontaneous digressions, and narrative fragmentation, interviews exhibit many similarities to the production of an animation.

In an interview, there is an active selection process at place in both what questions are asked and what information is divulged. Thus, a combination of historical fragments results in a patchwork of information supposedly grounded in fact. It is my hope that the animated vignettes function similarly to a collection of primary sources, encouraging viewers to take part in this act of interpretation and extrapolation, constructing their own

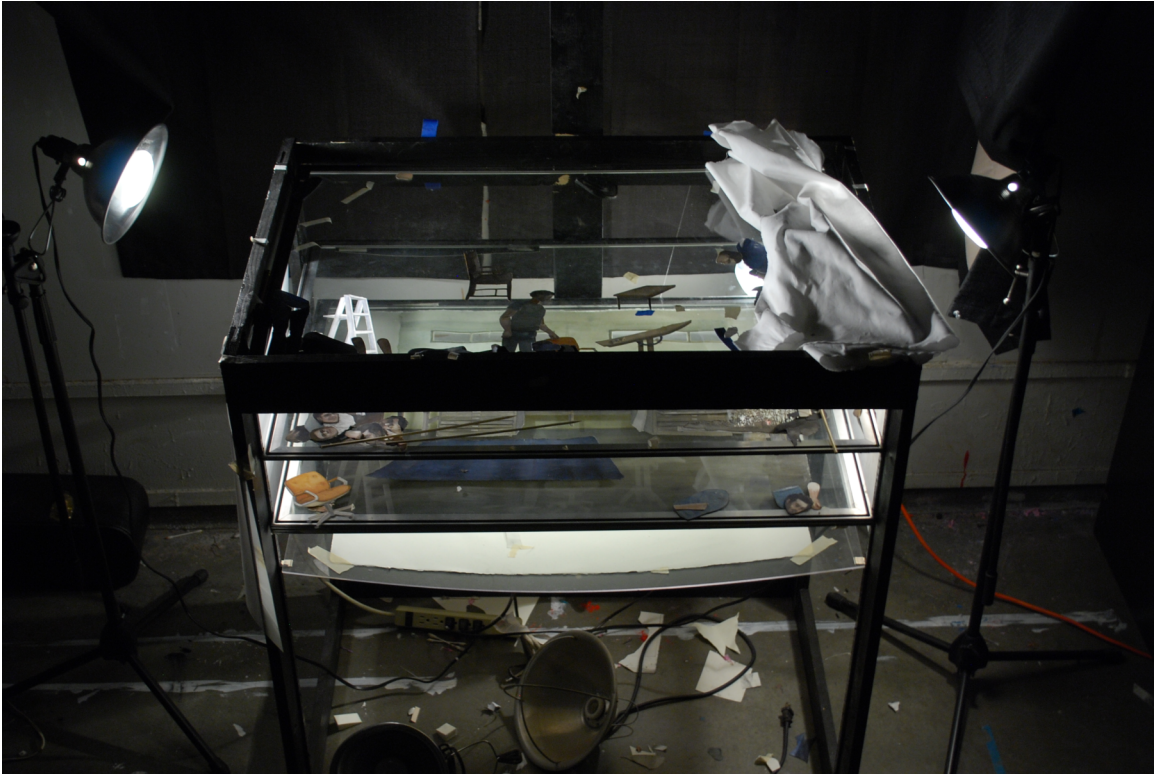


Fig. 1 View of the multi-plane camera – The camera is attached to the vertical beam and shoots downward through the panes of glass.

narratives from the materials at hand. Within the animation, I attempted to strike a balance between scenes of exposition and ambiguity. The first vignette, which features an elderly man combing through files before being interviewed, provides context for the piece before dissolving into the more abstracted imagery of later vignettes.

The second vignette signals a shift in time. It is suffused with imagery of the railway. Glimpses of the interviewee's hands and feet are intercut with those of passengers from decades past, blurring the boundaries between the time of the narrative that the interviewee is developing and the present. The music builds to a claustrophobic mass of rippling bass and descending chords, until it is silenced. One note rings out as the passengers disembark. This world is foreign yet familiar. The ghostly crowds thin, and a black hand descends to retrieve a scrap of cloth. The synthesis of African and

European musical traditions and the assemblage of various strains to form a rag is evoked by an interaction between the rag-picker and a quilter. The image of her cutting fabric for the quilt is juxtaposed with the interviewee clipping images from newspapers. These images lead to the third vignette, *The Ballad of Frankie and Johnny*. (Figure 2)

While the origins of this ballad remain nebulous, potentially pre-dating the American Civil War, the song we know today can be traced to events in St. Louis, Missouri, where Frankie Baker shot her lover Allen Britt in 1899.<sup>1</sup> He had just won a cakewalk dancing with another woman. Being well suited to the format of the murder ballad, these scandalous events were soon incorporated into contemporary popular music. Although there were numerous published versions of this song with melodic and lyrical variations aplenty, the one we recognize today congealed in 1912 in the verses of the Leighton Brothers and Ren Shields' *Frankie and Johnny or You'll Miss Me In The Days To Come*. While there are other examples of current events being absorbed into the popular musical vernacular, this instance, geographically and temporally related to the birth of ragtime and with an excessive amount of variation between the historical events and the ever fluctuating narratives developed by musicians, was well suited to be included in the *Inquisitive Vignettes* project.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Cecil. "Frankie and Albert/Johnny" in *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture*, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 542-546.



Fig. 2 Frankie Baker in *Inquisitive Vignettes*

Toying with ideas of projecting video onto physical objects that contain music led me to use the piano-roll as a screen for *Inquisitive Vignettes*. Other than the intimacy of its size, which requires viewers to approach the piano to watch the animation, the aspect of the piano roll I found most enticing was the perforations. The perforations act as marks – as physical remains of an action. My fingers depressed those notes at some point in time. In addition to functioning as traces of physical actions, the perforations interrupt the surface of the projection. Their vacuous presence obscures portions of visual information, evoking the breakdown of memory – the imperfect record. Their incessant vertical movement becomes integrated with the motion of the animation, and they provide a fleeting glimpse of what has been and what is to come. (Figures 3 and 4)



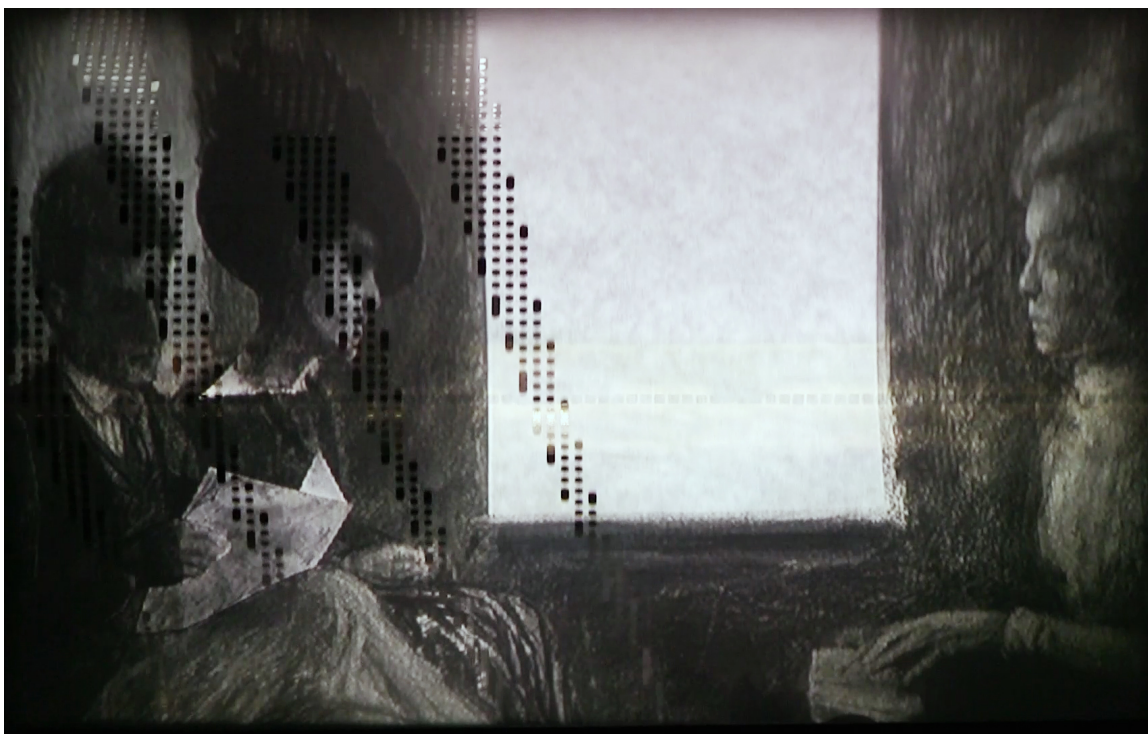


Fig. 3 Animation projected on the piano roll for *Inquisitive Vignettes*

The music contained on this roll is composed in an analogous way to our stories. Sections are written, reordered, and excised until the form is solidified. I recorded numerous takes of the soundtrack in MIDI and extensively edited them to create a version in perfect sync with the animation. It is this file from which the piano rolls were created. Thus, the final recording is comprised of nonconsecutive moments of time that have been selected and integrated to seem cohesive. What appears to be a direct recording has been manipulated, a physical object created by digital means. The chronology is confused.

This confluence of archaic and contemporary technology extends beyond the creation of the piano roll, itself. Player pianos sprung up in tandem with ragtime and with other methods of reproducing sound. They are essentially early computers, as they operate by processing the binary information contained on piano rolls. In order to synchronize the projected animation with the speed of the piano roll, it was necessary to incorporate more advanced technology.





Fig. 4 The player piano and animation with extra copies of the piano roll in the upper right

The player piano was retrofitted with an Arduino Uno processor that utilizes an infrared sensor to monitor the time interval between a series of perforations punched along the edge of the roll. When the piano is set to the appropriate tempo, these perforations are ideally a half-second apart, but their speed fluctuates along with the diameter of the roll. In order to compensate for this variance, a program running on a laptop analyzes the raw data from the Arduino and adjusts the frame-rate of the animation, accordingly. In the exhibition, I purposefully obscured the presence of these processes. The only visible suggestion of the new technologies was a computer keyboard, which was placed on the wall next to the piano at the same height as the instrument's keys. This keyboard served the dual purpose of interfacing with the software and drawing parallels between the two vastly different technologies at play.

As I contemplated the actions I was taking to create a soundtrack as a physical object, I developed ideas for a second animation, *Traces*. Formally, this second animation

contrasts with *Inquisitive Vignettes* in many respects. The vignettes are composed of desaturated imagery integrated with sound, while *Traces* is vibrant and silent. (Figure 5) *Inquisitive Vignettes* is linear and cinematic in the way it cuts from one scene to another, but *Traces* is stationary – grounded in one environment and looping, continuously folding back on itself. The circular nature of time within the piece eliminates a specific point of entry or exit, as events are under way when viewers first encounter the animation and continue after they depart. The continuous point of view, depriving viewers of the hyperactive editing that saturates contemporary media, redirects rhythm and pacing to the movements of the characters. This gives rise to a feeling of voyeurism and a heightened awareness of real-time, especially as a character resembling myself works uninterrupted in his studio for eighty seconds.

Despite the aforementioned disparities between the two animations, both *Traces* and *Inquisitive Vignettes* utilize the silhouette. (Figures 6 and 7) The silhouette has played a major role in narrative art, notably in early Asian shadow puppetry, continuing through to the Parisian obsession with the *Théâtre d'Ombres*, to Lotte Reiniger, Michel Ocelot, and beyond. Shadows are effective devices. They represent both a presence and an absence, as they distill form into two-dimensional images, suggesting rather than explaining. The mythic origin of painting tells of Dibutades, who traced the silhouette of her lover's visage on the wall before he departed.<sup>2</sup> It is this relation of silhouette to memory that I find so appealing – the desire to preserve a shadow, to leave marks that will persist. Although silhouettes provide the illusion of verity, they are easily

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<sup>2</sup> Muecke, Frances. "'Taught by Love': The Origin of Painting Again." *The Art Bulletin* 81.2 (1999): 297-302. and Forgione, Nancy. "'The Shadow Only': Shadow and Silhouette in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris." *The Art Bulletin* 81.3 (1999): 506.

manipulated. Agnès Varda formed the word *documenteur* by combining the French words for documenter and liar – the most precise description of my character’s role in *Traces*.



Fig. 5 Still from *Traces*

Where *Inquisitive Vignettes* is concerned with the collection and interpretation of artifacts, *Traces* is a meditation on their creation. It is situated between documentation and fabrication. It is all drawn from my studio environment and the people who frequent it, and the actions that take place in paper, frame by frame, are derived from physical precedents. I wanted to create a tension between perceptions of realism and artifice. This tension is enhanced by the fixed camera position and fact that the animation is projected life-size – two decisions that serve to implicate the viewer as an active participant of the proceedings.



Fig. 6 Still from *Inquisitive Vignettes*

Once a curtain is drawn over the scene, shadows come to define the figures and obscure their activities. There is simultaneously a flattening of the space and a greater sense of dimensionality. The curtain is real cloth, and the variance in its distance from the paper figures it conceals creates nuances of shadow suggestive of light wrapping around three-dimensional form. These contradictions of space contribute to a sense of ambiguity as my character traces silhouettes, documenting his visitors and falsifying data regarding their surroundings by meticulously constructing fictive spaces from shadow. (Figures 8 and 9)





Fig. 7 Still from *Traces*

In both the drawings and actions that constitute the animation, *Traces* is a distorted reflection of my studio practice, and it functions in much the same way as Dibutades' drawing. It is a record of my time in this studio and of two of the many people with whom I had the pleasure of interacting in the space. Its obsession with the preservation of the present echoes a similar concern for the past in *Inquisitive Vignettes*, the sound of which fills the space of my exhibition. The past has a presence – ringing out amid the deafening tinnitus of the present. Time and human nature are unrelenting, and the persistent urges to make records and reflect on them underlie much of our activity. There is a hope that we might preserve some bits of our consciousness that will persist in our absence – that we might leave a paper trail.



Fig. 8 Still from *Traces*



Fig. 9 Still from *Traces*





Fig. 10 *Paper Trails* MFA Thesis Exhibition in the KU Art + Design Gallery, March 9-14, 2014



Fig. 11 *Paper Trails* MFA Thesis Exhibition in the KU Art + Design Gallery, March 9-14, 2014